

The Compound – NOTES

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In the early morning hours of May 2, 2011, a US military raid on an al-Qa'ida compound killed Usama Bin Ladin, America's most wanted terrorist. The mission's success was the culmination of many years of complex, thorough, and highly advanced intelligence operations and analyses led by the CIA with support from partners across the Intelligence Community.

Shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States, the CIA began collecting information on key individuals connected to or providing support to Bin Ladin. Reporting made clear early on that he communicated via a network of couriers. It was years later, however, before more was known about one key courier than simply his *kunya*, or operational pseudonym. Analysts then worked several more years before identifying the area in Pakistan where the courier was believed to be located.

By late 2010, further intelligence enabled the identification of the courier's compound in Abbottabad, a town in Pakistan's Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province (formerly the Northwest Frontier Province), about 35 miles north of Islamabad. The compound and its main residence had extensive security features unusual for the area: high walls topped with barbed wire, double entry gates, opaque windows, no apparent internet or telephone connections, and all trash burned rather than collected. Moreover, the two registered owners did not appear to work or have an income that would allow them to afford such a large residence. This led the Intelligence Community to assess that the compound was probably being used to hide Bin Ladin, as well as the courier.

The operation on May 2nd, authorized by the President on April 29th, was a surgical raid by a small team of special operations forces designed to minimize collateral damage and to pose as little risk as possible to noncombatants on the compound or to Pakistani civilians in the neighborhood. In the aftermath, Bin Ladin was positively identified via several independent means.

The large quantity of materials collected from the compound required time for a thorough review. The CIA led a multi-agency task force to prioritize, catalogue, and analyze them for intelligence about al-Qa'ida's affiliates, plans and intentions, and current threats. The collected materials indicated that Bin Ladin remained an active leader in al-Qa'ida, providing strategic, operational, and tactical instructions to the organization. Though separated from many al-Qa'ida members in remote areas of the region, he was far from a figurehead. Bin Ladin remained in charge while in hiding.

Bin Ladin was al-Qa'ida's founder and only *amir*, or commander, in its history until his death. He was largely responsible for the organization's mystique, its ability to raise money and attract new recruits, and its focus on the United States as a target for terrorist attacks. The death of Usama Bin Ladin marked a significant victory in the US-led campaign to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qa'ida.

The daring raid that ensured that Bin Laden will never kill again was a team effort, the product of increased integration within the Intelligence Community and of close collaboration with our military partners. The CIA was at the center of it all, driving the collection of vital information, assessing each piece of data, and analyzing all sources to produce the compelling intelligence case that led US forces to Abbottabad. The Agency's contributions were the product of a decade of positive changes -- improved collection, analysis, technology, and support.

The compound where Bin Laden was hiding is in Abbottabad, a town in Pakistan's Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province (formerly the Northwest Frontier Province), about 35 miles north of Islamabad. The compound and its main residence had extensive security features: high walls topped with barbed wire, double entry gates, opaque windows, no apparent Internet or telephone connection, and the residents burned their trash. It was valued at \$1 million, but the two al-Qa'ida facilitators who owned it had no apparent source of wealth. For an illustration of the compound, click [here](#).

First, finding bin Laden was truly a triumph of intelligence. It's a long story -- too long to tell here -- but it begins nine years earlier, with the *nom de guerre* of an al-Qa'ida courier. Through painstaking collection and analysis over several years, the Agency and its partners in the Intelligence Community determined his true name. Finding the courier and then his residence in Abbottabad took another year of hard work. Instead of a small house from which the Agency hoped to follow him to bin Laden, the Abbottabad compound suggested immediately the possibility that bin Laden was living there. Extraordinarily high walls, barbed wire, no telephone or internet service, trash burned instead of put out for collection like everybody else's, children not going to school. Then we learned that an additional family matching the expected profile of bin Laden's family in flight was living at the compound, never left it, and was unknown to the neighbors. And we learned that the courier was, nine years later, still working for al-Qa'ida. It all added up -- the only conclusion that made sense of it all was that bin Laden was there. But there was no positive ID.

Which leads to the next point: This was also an example of difficult and momentous Presidential decision-making. There was strong circumstantial evidence that bin Laden was there, but not one iota of direct evidence. No eyes-on identification. And the risks and potential consequences of conducting an operation deep inside Pakistan were enormous, particularly if the operation failed. The President made a sound decision and, in my mind, a gutsy decision.

And, finally, the operation itself was a great triumph for our military. More dramatic than any work of fiction: the tension at the outset, the sickening feeling when one of the helos went down, the seeming eternity waiting to find out if the objective was achieved, and the relief when the last

helo lifted off with the force unharmed. My hat's off to these Special Unit operators – incredibly professional. When the helo went down, they didn't skip a beat. They had trained for all contingencies and slipped right into Plan B. Then there's the guy first in the room with bin Laden. Charged by two young women. Trained to expect suicide bombers in these circumstances. He grabbed them, shoved them into a corner and threw himself on top of them, shielding them from the shooting and shielding the guys behind him from the blast if they detonated. His quick thinking, and raw bravery, saved two lives that did not have to end that night.

Illustration of Abbottabad Compound

